

THE ARCHITECTURAL ADVANTAGES AND DEFICIENCIES OF LONDON.*

THAT there are certain sites so admirably suited by nature for the development of a city, that so long as the district where they exist be civilised or even populated, they must form its foci, is a fact historically demonstrated. Of such sites, perhaps the one most remarkable is that spot where two large political divisions of the earth's surface are only separated by a narrow tranquil strait. On Europe's side a platform but a few feet above the level of the sea, with a soil exuberantly fertile and a climate unexcelled, protected from the attack of either man or the elements by a forest-covered range of mountains commanding the resources either of the Mediterranean or the Euxine, receiving its merchandise from all parts of the world upon an almost unexcitable sea,—Constantinople, whether its rulers be Frank or Turk, will never cease to rank the 'queen of cities.' So in Italy, where Greek, Goth, Italian, all have stood in turn as conquerors, all have consented to the supremacy of Rome; but where, on the contrary, an uncongenial site, destitute of natural qualifications, has been selected, as in the old cities of Assyria, in Carthage, or the modern Munich, imbedded in a barren sandy plain, and relying solely on the acquired wealth or warlike character of its inhabitants, although raised to a dazzling but ephemeral splendour by the munificence of some imperial master,—on the first reverse of fortune they fall, never to re-appear. And when we consider attentively the site of London, although superior in comparison with those last mentioned, yet, should its dissolution be decreed and another race tread over the earth in which its ruins are entombed, they would pass it by and find in England many sites far more naturally pointed out as its metropolis.

The chance-favoured Romans, on whom devolved the task of selecting a position for their intended fort,—for we must not suppose them as foreseeing its growth even to a town,—guided by their warlike wants alone, pitched their camp as the sea-wave raises a rim upon the stony beach, that they might halt, return, recruit, and sweeping it before them, impress their brand higher up upon the conquered country. It chanced otherwise; the stragglers who remained, while the main army returned to a more congenial home, unable, with the trifling shelter of a camp, to resist the cold wet winter of the then, as now, inhospitable clime, felled some trees around them, and, with a process the same as, at the present day, goes on in some embryo empire of the far west, they raised unconsciously the first germ of the future London.

As architects—as artists—aiming at beauty and picturesqueness equally with practical materialism, we must confess nature has done but little for London. The atmosphere, misty and rarely clear in any part of England, is still less so in London; at the bottom of a natural basin, all the dense clouds from the neighbouring hills gravitate towards it, and the east wind never reaches unless burdened with the damp evaporation of the marshes which form the border of the Thames so many miles eastward. The sea, which like a bright and sparkling eye to a face otherwise but plain, animates and gives expression and brilliancy to the scenes of nature it adorns, is far distant. We cannot boast, like Naples and Constantinople, of a bay reflecting as a mirror the bright mass which seems to float so calmly on its surface. Neither, as in the cities of antiquity, can we point to a natural capitol which should form a dome—a culmen—to the whole, giving to the spectator, on whichever side he stands, the full command of all the beauties which are around him. With us no seven hills give the variety of undulation to our too monotonous levels; no quarries are at hand to yield the only beautiful and permanent material for its buildings, to give to each one not the appearance of being raised up piece by piece with mortar and with sand, but to have been at once carved out—sculptured from the native rock—resting upon the earth as a block that has issued from its bosom, and promising an almost coeval existence. But, although we must come to the conclusion that the site of London is far from naturally

beautiful, let us remember, in the words of Macaulay, lately, at Glasgow—"It is not on the fertility of the soil, it is not in the mildness of the atmosphere, that the prosperity of a city or a nation will depend,—slavery and superstition can make Campania a land of beggars, can change the plain of Enna to a desert; nor is it beyond the power of human intelligence and energy, developed by civil and spiritual freedom, to change sterile rocks and pestilential marshes to magnificent cities and luxuriant gardens." Let us see, then, what man has done as his share to supply these natural deficiencies, and by the creation of his art transform the disadvantages he labours under till they become the basis of a new peculiar character. Atmosphere must ever be the primary consideration. The Londoners found theirs naturally foggy: how have they endeavoured to improve it? Alas! day by day the refuse of 2,000 tons of coal is added to its foul burden. The Englishman is proud of the possession of that gloomy mineral, but what an enemy is it to the English architect,—through what a dirty glass does he behold his pretty picture when it is executed,—with what obstinacy do its foul black stains counteract the well-studied lights and shadows of his design! Let us take the south side of St. Paul's any time that the sun may have discovered that magnificent pile, and then examine the anomalies presented to our view, every projection probably with each side in shadow, as though all its illumination proceeded from the parallel gas-lamp in the street below,—mouldings and ornaments filled up and lost,—every variation of shadow that should constitute superficial effect in architecture, reversed, perverted, or obscured. And is there no remedy for this? Chemically, there is no portion of that sooty refuse incombustible: why should there be practically?

We have seen that London has no natural capitol; it were well, then, to supply its place with such a concentration of public buildings, as should afford a resting place for the wandering eye, and give the epithet magnificent to at least one quarter of the city; but, alas, how are they scattered! We fall upon them with such intervals, that our first idea must be they are few and insignificant; nor is such an idea far from the fact. If there be such a principle as proportion in art, it would follow that the public edifices in our cities should have some relation to their extent, and since London is in reality the largest of any city, it follows it should show an equally unexcelled array of public buildings. It is notoriously otherwise. Rome, Paris, Naples, very far exceed us even now, and how many of our noblest buildings date no farther back than the last ten or twenty years! London has but one character, that of extent, wearisome, monotonous extent: the complex arrangement of its streets, the smallness of its component parts, all contribute to this effect. But this extent must not be taken as implying grandeur, or vastness. It is not a city, but rather a mass of towns joined one to one,—respectable when viewed independently, but meagre and tame when considered in relation to the harmony and proportion of the whole. Nothing adds so much to this apparent pettiness as the jagged varying broken outline of our roofs: how have we jumbled together the horizontality of Italy and Greece with the high picturesqueness of the German roof, and produced a mongrel, destroying all beauty, dishonouring all architecture!

Hamburg, considerably nearer the cold north than London, affords an example of the practicability and beauty of flat roofs, worthy of our attention; there, since the late fire, the roofs have become, as in the cities of the East, the gardens of the town, with the air purer than below, less disturbance from the traffic in the streets; may we not hope at some early period having enticed 'rus in urbe,' to rival the mystic Babylon in our hanging gardens.

And here one word against the projects broached of late against the existence of our quiet tranquil squares, the only feature we can really mention as peculiar to London. "Naturam expellas furca tamen usque recurret" was the taunt of the Roman poet to his city-loving fellow citizens, and does it not apply to us? in vain do we limbo ourselves in material of our own creation; in vain smother all the yearnings of an innate love of nature: how

often has not the view, even of the perverted green of our melancholy squares, thrown a ray of cheerfulness over our moody mind, and touched the spring which lets loose at once upon us a crowd of happy associations and inspiring hopes! Mark the most dirty and neglected streets, you will still find some window where the poor inmate, with grateful heart, puts forth his humble offering to the shrine of nature. Better our squares, exclusive as they are, and selfishly enclosed from the tread of those who would enjoy them without thought of injury, than see them transformed into barren arenas for the strut of policemen, the nurseries of the mendicant and the thief, the noisy playground of the idle and the vagabond, the blank and meagre site of still more meagre statues.

Hamburg is perhaps the chief instance of a city rising from its ashes in greater splendour than it descended to them. The opportunity is generally lost, and for this reason, that the hurried and unexpected demand thus made upon the architectural talent of the time must produce much that is commonplace and un-studied; that men half ruined by their misfortune, and waiting for a sheltering roof, care little for its decoration, and would be sadly disposed, in their rebuilding, to merge every other consideration in that of economy.

The fire which in 1666 gave London an opportunity of regeneration on the grandest scale, gave, alas! that chance in vain; and although the loss was greatly qualified by the impetus thus given to the genius of Wren, there was but one Wren; and, worried as he was by the stupidity of the officials of his time, it is but natural that smaller works, left to the unguided rawness of a pupil, suffered accordingly. It is true he formed a comprehensive project for the rebuilding of the city,—a project of which it is idle to regret the execution. A time of unparalleled misery, discord, and selfishness, was not the fittest to ask of men that they should merge the right of property and frontages, the advantages of established business, for the chimerical compensation the new project offered. A vast and firm government would have been the only chance of appeal. The government of Charles II. and his ministers was never otherwise than careless and indifferent; nor was Wren's project faultless. I question, if carried out, whether it would meet the approbation it receives on paper.

A peculiar feature is the frequency of certain points, where six or eight converging streets constitute an arrangement, of which almost the only perfect type we possess in Seven Dials,—an idea excellent and highly admissible when the project is a labyrinth; but the few specimens we are acquainted with warn us against its adoption, save as an occasional curiosity. The traffic of each wide street poured at once into the central space would produce a jumble and confusion unparalleled even in the narrow crowded thoroughfares of the present day; besides that, the triangular wedged-shaped pieces left by this convergence are the most extravagant and ill-judged areas for building. The plan of a large collection of buildings should be as simple as practicable, adhering to straight lines, not only from the convenience of the parallel building areas, but from the greater grandeur produced by an arrangement of vistas and long-continued façades, than when the view is interrupted and checked by angles or abrupt curves; not that an occasional violation of this rule, where it is truly occasional, as in the Quadrant here, does not form, from its agreeable contrast, a beautiful and striking feature. And this leads us to the consideration of the cause of the apparent insignificance of London—the scarcity of continuous horizontal façades: each separate slice of our principal streets seems to pride itself upon its independence as a house, piled up like books of all sizes and all bindings on a library shelf; the elaborately decorated front, 60 feet frontage and the same in height, abuts upon a mean and narrow shop one-third the width, and with its parapet in line with its proud neighbour's first-floor windows—the chrysalis by the side of the gay butterfly, taunting it with its origin. A few continuous string-courses, ranging windows far apart, and a bold crowning cornice, give an effect of grandeur unattainable by far more extravagant superficial decoration. In our

* The following forms part of a paper read at the Architectural Association on Friday, the 30th ult.